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AUTHOR James, Anita C.
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ABSTRACT

Within the structure of a senior and graduate level course, students in the Ohio University school of interpersonal communication collaborate with community groups in the creation of campaigns promoting issue-awareness, political candidates, fund raising events, and citizen action. The course objectives include teaching students to understand the communication processes involved in the development of a campaign and to provide constructive comments about its organization, development, and execution. The class objectives may be achieved in one of three tracks: (1) lowest level of direct involvement; (2) high level of planning and organizing with no direct participation; or (3) organizing, participating, and evaluating. Class time is spent either discussing materials from the text or listening to guest speakers. The text materials focus on the role of communication in campaigns in such areas as candidate images, agenda setting by the media, persuasive strategies, and nonprofit organizations. The guest speakers are drawn from the community to represent various kinds of organizations. In all cases, the emphasis is on providing the students with a balanced view of the myriad ways they can become involved with the community. The course also enables students to test some of their interests against the demands of such careers as conference planning, campaign managing, professional fund-raising, and special interest advocacy. The course appears to serve a useful role within the larger community as well. (HTH)

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PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS AND COMMUNITY NEEDS: PLACING THE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN IN THE COMMUNITY

Anita C. James
School of Interpersonal Communication
Ohio University
Athens, Ohio 45701-2979

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a university course in speech communication that enables students to make direct application of their skills to community campaigns. Working under supervision students become involved in all phases of campaigns designed to raise funds, increase issue awareness, advocate citizen action, or elect political officeholders. The benefits to the students and to the community are also examined.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS AND COMMUNITY NEEDS: PLACING THE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN IN THE COMMUNITY

Introduction

For those who have read George Orwell's 1984, tearing off the calendar page from December 1983 to January 1984 brought with it questions of what the year would hold. Dire predictions of intrusive personal surveillance and limited public freedom did not materialize as scripted in 1984. What has been seen, however, are the frenetic activities of Presidential aspirants criss-crossing the country in their never-ending quest for the public seal of approval. The designation of a single nominee and the development of his/her campaign for election highlights several issues of interest to communication practitioners and scholars.

The forums in which campaign issues are discussed range from the typical Political Science and History classes to the hallways of senior citizen centers around the country. One forum which is often overlooked by observers is that of the communication classroom. Notwithstanding its centuries-old interest in political activity and analysis, the lack of awareness by the external community (outside the walls of the academy) of the diversity of the speech communication discipline has proved to be a roadblock in the community's use of this valuable resource.

The benefits that accrue from the interactions between community organizations and university students are better known for disciplines other than speech communication. Certainly, the projects completed by students enrolled in Public Relations, Management Sciences, Education, etc., are familiar to many community members. What may be overlooked are the very significant benefits resulting from the use of students in communication courses to design, organize, and execute campaigns for community groups.

The School of Interpersonal Communication at Ohio University has been providing students with the opportunity to become actively engaged in meeting the needs of community organizations for more than a decade. Within the structure of a senior-level and graduate course, Communication and the Campaign, students collaborate with community groups in the creation of campaigns to effectively promote issue-awareness, political candidates, fund-raising events, and citizen action.

Rationale for the Course

Meeting the needs of today's college student is not an easy task. The proliferation of career opportunities in fields that did not exist 15 or 20 years ago requires a continuing assessment of how the University can best meet the professional needs of the student while also providing the core of a life-long "education". The skills and abilities that the student can transfer to a career position often weigh more heavily in the mind of a company recruiter than does the degree program from which the student matriculates. One way of providing for this "meshing" of student and educational expectations is by enabling the student to try applying the theories of the discipline to selected practical problems of the community.

The American Management Associations define competence as "... one's potential for effective performance, not ... one's accumulated knowledge" (1984). Boyatzis (1980) writes that it is "an underlying characteristic of a person that leads to effective and/or superior performance." The issue for educators is how to prepare students both to acquire and be able to demonstrate competence by the time they leave the university. It is a delicate balance that exists in higher education as the schools attempt to meet the students' needs for professional training while remaining true to the ideals of higher education.

Many academic subject areas do not include courses that enable a student to test his/her acquisition of knowledge via the use of that information in actual situations. While there are a few exceptions, most students graduate from college hoping that they have learned material they can use on their jobs. The Communication and the Campaign course permits students to demonstrate their ability to apply what they've learned (before they graduate) through their involvement in community campaigns.

Objectives of the Course

In the development of the Communication and the Campaign course the following four objectives served as benchmark criteria for the variety and type of assignments. Students completing the course should be able to:

1. Distinguish among campaigns to raise funds, to increase awareness about an issue, to elect an officeholder, and to urge citizens to take action.

2. Understand the communication processes involved in the development of a campaign and the identification of campaign issues.

3. Critically examine a campaign and provide constructive comments about its organization, development, and execution.

4. Discuss the underlying research issues and theories that provide the basis for campaign strategies.

Structure of the Course

The objectives may be achieved in one of three different ways. Providing three options (tracks) for the student minimizes the possibility that a student is required to participate in a campaign where that involvement is marred by time or interest constraints. Briefly stated, the three tracks structure the student's experiences in the following ways:

Track 1

1. Lowest level of direct involvement.
2. Students select an on-going campaign and follow its progress in newspapers, news magazines, radio, television, etc.
3. Students complete a series of written assignments intended to demonstrate level and depth of familiarity with the campaign.
4. Students complete both an analysis of the communicative strategies apparently operational in the campaign and a research paper on a particular issue in campaign communication.

Track 2

1. High level of planning and organizing; no direct participation.
2. Students (2-5) select an organization for which to develop a campaign strategy notebook. The plan is generally implemented the following quarter.
3. Students complete a detailed strategy notebook that reflects topics such as: type of campaign, organizational structure of campaign coordinators, volunteer recruitment plans, advertising budget and copy, critical issues analysis, and time frame for execution.
4. Students identify and discuss solutions to potential stumbling blocks in the successful completion of the campaign.

Track 3

1. Highest level of participation.

2. Students (2-7) select a community group or organization that is planning a campaign and offer their services. [Community groups often contact the course instructor as much as 6 to 9 months before the beginning of class to request students for their campaigns.]
3. Students identify (with their campaign supervisor) their areas of responsibility in the campaign.
4. Students prepare a set of goals, objectives, and activities for their portion of the campaign. A time line is also drawn up for the accomplishment of the goals.
5. Students devote approximately 6 to 10 hours per week to the campaign.
6. Students complete a self-evaluation of their role in the campaign.
7. Students prepare an analysis of the campaign from the perspective of its communicative processes evident and their effectiveness.

The evaluation of the students involves several different measures: examinations, written materials, peer evaluations (Tracks 2 and 3 only) and supervisory evaluations (Track 3 only).

The Campaigns

The number of students enrolled at any one time in Communication and the Campaign varies from 49 to 107. Naturally the number of campaigns the students participate in also varies proportionately with the size of the class. In a typical year approximately 75 percent of the students elect to participate in Track 3 and work in actual campaigns. The remaining students are usually divided 15 percent in Track 1 and 10 percent in Track 2.

Examples of the types of campaigns students have participated in include:

* Athens County Senior Center Community Spaghetti Supper- the students were responsible for all advertising, music, and sponsor donations.

* Student Senate Voter Registration '83 - the students were responsible for planning, organizing, and executing the largest student voter registration campaign in the history of the state of Ohio. More than 4,000 students were registered in October and the campaign students received a commendation from the Ohio Secretary of State.

* Election Campaigns - of candidates for city and county offices. While some campaigns were successful in that the candidates were elected; others were well done even in the defeat of the candidate. Several students were singled out by the candidates as having been instrumental in the final victory. At least one campaign was planned, organized, and executed solely by students and resulted in the election of their candidate to the City Council.

* Athens County Humane Society - the students were responsible for fund-raising activities to supplement the budget of the Society. Raised enough money to triple the budget for that fiscal year.

* Numerous campaigns for groups and organizations such as: The Residential Treatment Program, Athens Childrens Theatre, a state representative, state and national political candidates, Athens International Film Festival, Black Student Cultural Programming Board, Kiwanis Annual Auction, and Peer Counseling.

The Balance Between Knowledge Acquisition and Skills Application

As noted eralier in the discussion of the rationale for the course, it is important that students be able to develop appropriate competencies and demonstrate those competencies in accordance with their performance on the job. A critical question that faces educators is how to balance the acquisition of knowledge and skill competency without turning the four-year colleges and universities in trade or technical schools?

Certainly, the student pressure is toward specific job preparation and skill instruction. However, this approach may conflict with the goals of a broader education that prepares the student to become a fully functioning member of the larger community in which s/he will exist. It is reasonable to assume that the balance can come in the students' understanding that there is an academic component to the course even while it seems that the practical experience component predominates.

In the Communication and the Campaign course the class time is spent in two ways: discussing material from the text or listening to guest speakers. The text material focus on the role of communication in campaigns in such areas as candidate images, agenda setting by the media, persuasive strategies, non-profit organizations, etc. The guest speakers are drawn

from the community to represent the various types of organizations fund-raising arm of the University to the non-profit advocacy group, Ohio Public Interest Campaign. In all cases, the emphasis is on providing the students with a balanced view of the multitudinous ways they can become involved with the community. The guest speakers present the students with options concerning some possible career paths as well as the suggestion that community involvement should also occur on a volunteer basis.

Overall, the intention in the course is to create opportunities where students can share within the community through the application of their knowledge in the fulfilment of the cam- paign responsibilities.

Meeting Community Needs

It is the evaluation of the instructors in Communication and the Campaign that the course serves a useful role in the larger community. Although that conclusion has not been objectively measured it stands in light of the numerous requests received each year for placement of students in community campaigns. The population of the city of Athens is about 20,000 people and students comprise about 14,000 of that total. Certainly, given its size, Athens has limited resources unless it turns to the abundance of the University. Philosophically, it is reasonable for the students to assume community roles in return for the benefits received from living in the town for eight or nine months each year.

Working with an organization's campaign provides the student with the opportunity to become involved in the community in a way that increases his/her self-esteem and job possibilities while aiding the organization in its goal attainment. As noted earlier, in the discussion of the different campaigns the students had worked with, the goals are many and varied. A scarcity of resources (human and material) often plagues campaigns in the community and the students provide a counter to that state of being.

Conclusion

Joslyn (1984) notes that the rules of the political game have changed in the last twenty years. He cites the decrease in party identification among citizens and the increase in the numbers of paid campaign consultants as two of the rule changes. Other spokespeople for education and government decry the trend of the current college student to be so self-involved that s/he is unaware of the larger context in which they exist. It is unlikely that there is any technique guaranteed to make a student involved in the wider community.

The experiences of students in the Communication and the Campaign course does suggest that giving students a chance to make worthwhile contributions to the community is one way to encourage continued involvement in community affairs.

In addition to encouraging community involvement students are able to test some of their interests against the demands of such careers as conference planning, campaign managing, professional fund-raising, and special interest advocacy. The employment opportunities are increasing with each passing year and our students should be prepared to join that market.

The types and numbers of campaigns will also increase as the federal government restricts funding for various programs and forces communities to turn inward for their support. There is a need for citizens who are competent to plan, organize, and execute campaigns for different causes. In speaking to the efficacy of the course discussed in this paper perhaps the most telling comments are those made by graduates who say they have used the experiences of the Communication and the Campaign course as stepping stones to job offers in their chosen professions and to increased activity in their home communities.

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